# NEW FICTION —IN— VARIED FORMS

1492. By Mary Johnston. Little, Brown & Co.

MISS JOHNSTON has amply demonstrated her right to recognition as a poet novelist of no commonplace order, but in this, her latest phase, she appears as a poet gone somehow wrong. If only all of this book were as good as some of it, it might have been a tale that would have placed her far above the author of "To Have and To Hold" or any of the intermediate volumes that she has put out during the last twenty years. The idea of this is epic; perhaps that is what is the matter with the book for Miss Johnston is not an epic poet. There are many very beautiful passages, following a splendid start, but then the narrative thins and wanders off into a fog, and—to put it brutally—becomes very hard reading. Miss Johnston is important enough to call for the application of severe critical measurements, though it is an ungrateful task.

It seems a pity that in proportion as some qualities of her work have been developing and maturing during the last decade she should have taken over certain sadly crippling faults of style. There was a clearness and smoothness about her earlier work, in spite of occasional awkwardnesses that indicated the conscientious artisan. Now she seems to have cast that aside for a curious inspirational Babu-English, almost a Patience Worth style, which so confuses and annoys the reader that if he would finish the book he must do so by sheer force of will.

The story is a romantic version of the life of Columbus, keeping fairly close to the familiar tradition and accepted facts. It is told in the first person by one Jayme de Marchena, an adventurous gentleman who was in danger from the Inquisition because, unfortunately, he had a Jewish grandmother. He enlists as a common sailor, calling himself Juan Lepe, and sails with Columbus. The machinery of it is good, and is not too much intruded. She has added little to the material ready at hand, of which there was excess supply. And up to the time of Columbus's actual departure from Spain she focusses the story upon groups not too large for the canvas of an ordinary novel. They are life size figures, seen clearly enough, and animated; not moving too eccentrically for the imagination to follow. They are soundly dramatic; a little stiff, as if they moved to music and took their stage positions obediently to their actor manager's direction, but there is life in it, variety, and the interest is held.

In this part one even forgets to complain of the curiosities of diction, and begins to think that Miss Johnston is going to do something very much worth while. Lines of real poetry flash out; thoughtful phrases, and you become aware of her as an unusual person, a thinker in her own right, not an imitator.

But then she goes to sea. And from that point to the end of a very long story it is as if she had lost her way in a wild endeavor to cram in everything. The figures dwindle and become obscure. Small incidents and the great sweep of events are given the same values, and all cemented into a heterogenous mass by a large amount of turgid comment. The actors lose what life and stature they had and become small and cramped in action. There is a blurring, a breaking down of narrative tissue, and one has an unhappy sense of a good piece gone wrong. The thing as a whole lacks dramatic unity.

In spite of her fondness for the historical novel, she has little of historic imagination in the sense in which, for example and contrast, Charles Kingsley had it. This book, unhappily, challenges comparison with "Westward Ho!" Nevertheless, the fine things in it, such as the scene at an inn (Chapter III.) where there are a few well nigh perfect pages, would be enough to redeem the story were it not for the strange things she does to the English language. Everywhere are scattered sentences that must be read two or three times to get at any meaning, and sometimes the meaning wholly escapes. How is this to be translated:

"What if all this that we have found since the first island and that means only the beginnings of what is to be found—?"

At first one puts it down to a printer's error and absence of proof reading, but the queerness is too great for that. Annoyingly noticeable, for example, is her violent quarrel with the poor little small fry, a, an, and the. True, they do pepper a page and take up room, but when they are utterly cast out, one misses them. "Heralds, banners, bright flame at end of road,"—"It was island, masthead told us, who saw blue ribbon going round." There it is, you see; chinks where the articles have fallen out, until you fear that the whole structure may crumble.

It may be suspected that this disease is an infection from the "school" of Amy Lowell and the ejaculatory *vers librist* experimenters. It is an unhappy experiment, the more so because, even in this book, she shows that she can still write clear cut, brilliant, richly colored and accurate English. Our complaint is justified, since the writer whose books go to a large audience is under a duty to the language, especially in these days when a thin smear of education has made for carelessness—a duty that should compel the utmost striving for clean English.

GEORGIA WOOD PANGBORN.

---

OVINGTON'S BANK. By Stanley J. Weyman. Longmans, Green & Co.

IT is a pleasure, and a relief, to turn from the jerry-built average of current fiction to so substantial a construction as that of this novel. There is nothing scamped about Mr. Weyman's workmanship; this is no lath and plaster affair built to a quantity production specification. He has taken his time about it, and it is built to last; a large edifice of a type not common nowadays, with ample room in it, and of excellent proportion. It is an historical novel, opening in the England of 1825 and ending with the panic year that followed upon the too great and unbalanced speculation which marked the recovery of business and trade after the Napoleonic wars—an era that holds many parallelisms to our own day. Railroads were just beginning to appear, but it was not thought that a speed greater than fifteen miles an hour could ever be "advisable." But the opening of the industrial era had gone far enough to bring about tremendous stock jobbing; fortunes were made by magic overnight, with the inevitable result of a curative smash. The old Squire-archy still ruled, but its days were numbered and some aristocrats foresaw what was coming.

Against this background, which is very fully and accurately painted in, Mr. Weyman shows the development of two sets of people: the old Squire Griffin, and his daughter and his more progressive nephew, Arthur, on the one side, and on the other, Ovington, the selfmade man and banker, with his son Clement and his daughter. There is also a large supplementary caste

*Continued on Page Seventeen.*